

FEED CHILDREN

 **Military Family Lifestyle Survey**

 **Economic Stability**

2022 Comprehensive Report

Food Insecurity

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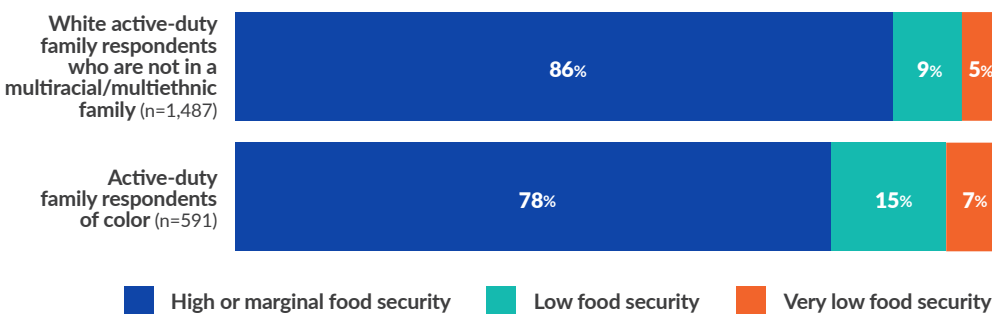
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Food insecurity levels greater than the U.S. overall persist amongst active-duty family respondents; a quarter of enlisted families are reporting low/very low food security. Food insecurity is a symptom of financial insecurity, which may impact the likelihood to recommend military service.

Military service members and their families' need for food assistance is a problem identified more than a decade ago¹ by military- and Veteran-service organizations. Many have since continued to provide support and education in this area of need.^{2,3,4} In 2021, the first Department of Defense (DOD) accounting of food insecurity within its ranks confirmed that one-quarter of active-duty service members have experienced food insecurity.⁵ Furthermore, food insecurity is experienced across the force,⁶ and military lifestyle-specific conditions such as PCS and spouse unemployment are possible contributing factors for food insecurity,⁷ which affects the entire military family.⁸ While 10% of civilian families in the United States experienced food insecurity⁹ in 2021, 16% percent of active-duty family respondents reported experiencing low/very low food security levels in the 12 months preceding survey fielding. While the disparity between respondents and the civilian population is notable, this data is well below the DOD estimated 26% of personnel experiencing food insecurity.^{10,a} Furthermore, while food insecurity occurs across all ranks, proportionally more enlisted families report experiencing low or very low food security: one-quarter (26%) of enlisted active-duty family respondents reported experiencing some level of food insecurity in contrast to 4% of officer active-duty family respondents. Furthermore, previous Blue Star Families' research

Figure 1: Food Insecurity Across Racial/Identity Groups^d



shows that active-duty family respondents of color reported twice the level of food insecurity as their white, non-Hispanic counterparts.^b

In a different breakdown, nearly one in five (18%) recently relocated^c active-duty family respondents

experienced some level of food insecurity during that same 12 month time period in contrast to 15% of their counterparts who had not recently relocated. Differences among branch affiliation of respondents were also noted. Aligning with recently published reports,¹¹ a greater number of active-duty family respondents affiliated with the Army reported experiencing food insecurity than those in other branches.

^a The Status of Forces Survey-Active Component from which these estimates are derived is generalizable to the entire force while the MFLS oversamples senior enlisted and officer rank affiliated respondents.

^b Data results were reported based on the 2020 MFLS. For more discussion, please see https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/REI_Finding-6_Finances_Spotlight-6_Food-Insecurity.pdf.

^c Recently relocated is defined as those who had PCSed in the 12 months preceding survey fielding.

^d Active-duty family respondents of color include those who selected American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino/a/x or of Spanish origin, Middle Eastern or North African, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. They could also select white and/or a write-in option, but not as the only option.

White, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents not in multiracial/multiethnic families are defined as respondents who only selected white (and no other answer choices) to the race/ethnicity select-all question and answered they are not a member of a multi-racial/ethnic family.

Table 1: Experienced Food Insecurity in the 12 months Preceding Survey Fielding
Active-duty family respondents by branch affiliation

	Air Force (n=588)	Army (n=769)	Navy (n=598)
High or marginal food security	86%	81%	86%
Low food security	10%	13%	8%
Very low food security	4%	7%	6%

*Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Space Force were not included due to small sample size

Financial stress and unemployment issues for military spouses are key to understanding food insecurity among military families.

These food insecurity numbers, while sobering, only tell a part of the story for some military families. Food insecurity in active-duty military families is also interconnected with larger military family financial challenges such as spouse unemployment, frequent relocations, and housing costs:^{12,e}

21% of active-duty family respondents who **indicated “underemployment or unemployment” is a top contributing factor to family financial stress** also had low or very low food security.^f

16% of active-duty family respondents who **said “relocation costs” is a top contributing factor to family financial stress** had low or very low food security.

18% of active-duty family respondents who **said “housing costs” is a top contributing factor to family financial stress** had low or very low food security.

Approximately 1 in 10 (12%) active-duty spouse respondents^g who are working either full time or part time report experiencing low food security^h in the 12 months prior to survey fielding compared to 1 in 4 (25%) active-duty spouse respondents who are not currently working but want or need employment.

Food Support Program Utilization for Military Families

There are food support programs available to military families. For one, pandemic-related policy changes eliminated the eligibility requirement for the National School Lunch Program and for a time, provided equitable access to meals for all children in participating schools. Three-quarters (74%) of active-duty family respondents with children enrolled in K-12 education were attending schools that *offered* free breakfasts and lunches during the duration of the 2021-2022 school year and the majority (85%) of families who were offered this benefit *received* free meals.

^e Survey respondents were asked “Which of the following contributes to your family’s current financial stress? Please select your top 3 choices.” Respondents can select more than one source of family financial stress so those with relocation costs as a contributing factor may have also chosen housing costs and others.

^f In the 12 months preceding survey fielding.

^g Who are not also active-duty service members.

^h Low food security indicates that the respondent has low or very low food security based on survey questions.

In addition, efforts aimed at increasing the knowledge of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program and qualification guidelines have targeted military families in the past few years.^{13,14,15} While many military families are not eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)ⁱ due to the inclusion of the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as income,^{16,17} the WIC program^j offers eligibility for a wider subpopulation of military families though the maximum child age of 8 years old does limit the eligibility for families with older children. WIC is one of the most utilized food assistance programs among active-duty family respondents. However, participation is more common amongst enlisted families with junior enlisted military family respondents utilizing the program at three times the level of their mid-grade enlisted counterparts.

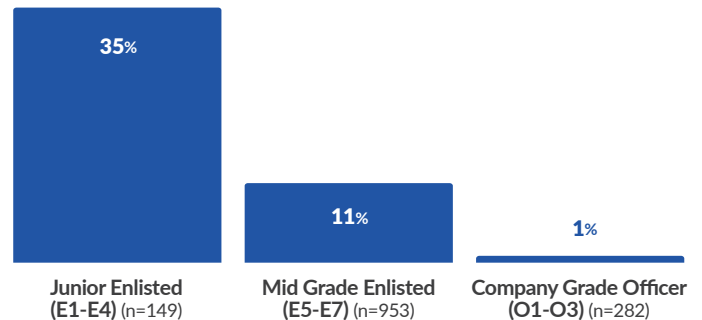
As knowledge of food insecurity issues amongst military families increases, more charitable organizations have stepped in to provide access to traditional food pantry programs as well as offering additional food outreach through holiday food baskets and other community food distributions. Utilization of these programs is relatively common and a greater proportion of respondents who report financial challenges also report utilizing these resources. Approximately one in 10 (9%) active-duty family respondents have utilized a local food pantry/ community food distribution resources in the 12 months prior to survey fielding, twice the rate previously reported in a government report focused on active-duty spouses.¹⁸ While this support is invaluable, charitable organizations cannot and should not be expected to solely meet the food needs of military families. Despite official efforts to encourage families to utilize government assistance programs, including the release of a road map to strengthen food security in the overall force¹⁹ and calls from senior leadership encouraging families to utilize available government programs,²⁰ many military families may still be wary of applying for official government assistance programs due to perceived career repercussions.²¹

Commissary Use

In response to increasing inflation and its effects on military family financial security, the Secretary of Defense promised to fully fund commissaries with the goal of cutting prices to provide at least a 25% savings over civilian grocery stores.²² Over two-thirds (68%) of active-duty family respondents state they use the commissary, and only half (50%) agree that the commissary is a valued benefit. The most cited reasons for using the commissary were: “price/value”, “convenience”, and “availability of unique products”. Distance to base was a factor in commissary

Figure 2: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program Participation in Last 12 Months

Active-duty family respondents



*No respondents from the Senior Enlisted (E8-E9), Field Officer (O4-O6), and General Officer (O7-O10) rank groupings reported WIC participation.

ⁱ SNAP has gross and net income limits, based on the number of people in the household. You must meet both requirements to qualify. The gross monthly income is based on 130% of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) poverty guideline for those living in the continental U.S. Net income is based on 100% of the poverty line. However, these limits are higher in Alaska and Hawaii.

^j Income eligibility for the WIC program is determined using income standards as prescribed under section 9(b) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42 USC 1758(b)). The income limit is 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, as adjusted. Section 9(b) also requires that these guidelines be revised annually to reflect changes in the Consumer Price Index.

use with 89% of active-duty family respondents who live on base reporting they use the commissary compared to their peers who live less than 30 minutes away off installation (64%). While the most common reason for using the commissary was “price/value,” families who live off the installation may not find the cost savings enough to outweigh the cost of traveling to the commissary.²³

The Hidden Consequences of Food Insecurity

In the immediate term, service members without stable access to food, or who are concerned that their families do not have stable access to food, may be less able to focus on mission readiness.²⁴ Additionally, while the likelihood to recommend service is multifaceted and varies by personal experience, (See Recommending Service Finding for more information), 4 in 10 active-duty family respondents (40%) who reported low or very low food security are unlikely to recommend^k military service to a young family member, compared to just 26% of active-duty family respondents with moderate to high food security who are unlikely to recommend military service.

Recommendations

For Congress

- Exclude the Base Allowance for Housing (BAH) from income calculations for eligibility for all federal nutrition assistance programs, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
- **Amend the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) to be a more robust program that can increase food security for thousands of military families.***
 - Update eligibility calculations to exclude BAH from income calculations to allow tens of thousands of military families to qualify for this assistance program and become food secure.²⁵
 - Ensure efficacy through oversight and reporting on the implementation.
 - Commission a report on the impact of food insecurity for military families on military readiness.

For the Department of Defense

- Prioritize financial security efforts for military families, including military spouse employment, child care, and other cost burdens. See the other findings in this report for specific, actionable recommendations.
- Create a Military Family Food Insecurity Task Force that includes stakeholders from military service and anti-hunger organizations to address the root causes of food insecurity and make recommendations to the Department.
- Revise the BNA program guidelines to exclude receipt of federal nutrition assistance programs from calculations of income, bringing BNA calculations more in line with other allowances.

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

^k Respondents were asked: “How likely are you to recommend that a young family member (child, niece, nephew, etc.) join the military?” On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being “very unlikely to recommend” and 10 being “very likely to recommend.” Responses from 0-3 were categorized as “would not recommend service.”

Endnotes

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